Joe Gaines 'owes' service to public

JOE GAINES
. . . Washougal Public Servant

Add up Joe Gaines' time in service as a public official and you come up with the sum of 28 years. He's 74 years old now, and still serving the public. He does it, he says, because "I feel I owe it to 'em."

Gaines resides now at 1537 NE 5th Ave. in Camas with his wife, Mildred. Since traveling to Washington in April 1914, however, he has lived in Camas, Washougal and Skamania County. He has lived the major portion of his life in Washougal, though, and says he is still "partial" to the city.

Gaines' list of public service credentials is long. He has served on the Skamania School Board, Democratic Central Committee in Skamania County, Port of Camas-Washougal commission, was a Washougal mayor, and was on the Clark County Board of Adjustment.

He is now chairman of the Clark County Board of Equalization and is president of the Washougal Senior Citizens Center. It seems more likely that the public owes Gaines a big "thank you".

Gaines was born in Missouri in 1902. At the age of 12, in 1914, he and his family became ill with malaria, like many others who lived near the swamps at that time.

After surveying the situation, Albert Gaines, Joe's father, decided to make the move to Washington, where a relative lived. They came to Camas and Albert landed a job at the Camas mill. They liked the much healthier environment, despite mill pollution. It was better than malaria.

Gaines' memory is good. He remembers the dirt streets, the horse trough where the traffic light at the end of Fourth Avenue is now, and the two livery stables.

Of Camas Gaines concedes, "Outside of the mill, there was nothing."

But that began to change. As the mill grew, so did Camas and even Washougal. Gaines started a grocery store in Washougal, but went broke in 1931, when his bank went bust.

It wasn't the Great Depression that caused the bank's failure, but a bank employee who took off with the money, according to Gaines.

In any case, by 1934, Gaines had enough money to buy another store in Skamania County, and operated it until 1948. It was during this time that Gaines began his second career, as a public servant.

He joined the school board and the Democratic Central Committee.

In 1948, Gaines moved back to Washougal and started a dry goods store. He did not serve on another public agency until 1959, when he joined the Camas-Washougal Port Commission.

Gaines served for 10 years on the port commission, three of them as president. He was part of the crew of far-sighted commissioners who first envisioned an industrial park at the port, and bought 201 acres from the D.M. Stevenson Ranch for industrial use.

This active port commission also worked with the Army Corps of Engineers in building the dike, and talked the Bonneville Steel Yard into locating in the new industrial park.

Today the present port commission has plans to expand the industrial park, and add a barge loading facility and boat marina. Gaines is proud of the part he played in bringing the dream of an industrial park into reality.

While still a port commissioner, Gaines was elected mayor of Washougal in 1964. His reign was marked both with controversy and accomplishment.

"When I became Washougal mayor, this caused a lot of controversy. Some people said it was a conflict of interest for me to be both the mayor and a port commissioner. Some people tried getting me out," Gaines explains today.

It wasn't this controversial item, however, which eventually did cause Gaines to decide to resign as Washougal mayor, in 1967.

Gaines views the installation of the Washougal sewer system, the first in the town's history, as his major accomplishment as Washougal mayor. It was also this issue which caused him to resign.

"The sewer system was a hot potato. People didn't want to have to pay for it. Some thought the lagoon would smell. This issue cost me customers and friends. It must have cost me $5,000 in business at my store," Gaines admits.

In 1967 Gaines resigned in mid term "because of all the flack over the sewer system. People didn't realize till later what they had," he says. "People admit today the sewer system was the best thing that ever happened."

Gaines continued to serve on the port commission until 1969, when he thought, "10 years was enough." He then spent a brief six months as chairman of the Clark County Board of Adjustment. Gaines helped to organize the new board.

In 1970, Gaines was appointed to the county board of equalization, on which he serves today. He is chairman of that board, and is the man to talk to if you think your property assessments are unfairly high.

Why has Joe Gaines served for so long on so many public agencies, and why does he continue to do so even at 74 years of age?

"I guess I did it because I'm a damn fool who couldn't say no," Gaines said, grinning. I made my living in Washougal, and I felt I owed them something.

As for serving now, Gaines explains, "I'm retired now, and it's something for me to do. The board of equalization only takes about 40 days a year out of my time."

And what does Gaines think of today's crop of public officials? "I think we have good government," he said. "Public officials today are doing the best they can under the circumstances."

Those circumstances, of course, are lack of money and tight budgets. As Gaines says, "Money is the name of the game."